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SUBJECT: PEACE NOW CHIEF SKEPTICAL BUT SUPPORTIVE OF PM'S  
DISENGAGEMENT PLAN

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The head of Peace Now told Embassy econoff that he welcomed the PM's initiative calling for the unilateral dismantling of settlements in the Gaza Strip and some in the West Bank. Peace Now is skeptical, however, about the PM's seriousness and cautioned the U.S. to look at the actions of this government rather than the words. The organization does not foresee the imminent demise of the government coalition despite the harsh rhetoric from those within the government who oppose the plan. Peace Now predicts those in opposition to the plan will wait until the PM takes an irrevocable step before quitting the government, such as the ordering of the evacuation of a settlement or large occupied outpost. End summary.

12. (C) The General Secretary of Peace Now, Yariv Oppenheimer, told Embassy econoff on February 25 that his organization is taking a wait and see approach to the PM's unilateral disengagement plan. Oppenheimer said the hallmark of Sharon's settlement policy has been "positive rhetoric, backed up by little action on the ground." Oppenheimer remarked that had the PM taken already promised action against the outposts there would be few outposts remaining. Oppenheimer remarked that the government's unofficial motto to the settlers is "see what I do, not what I say." Oppenheimer speculated that the PM may have made the decision to announce the unilateral disengagement plan for any number of reasons, including: to divert attention from his ongoing legal troubles; to staunch the negative tide of international pressure caused by the seam-zone barrier; to appear to the Israeli public as having a long-term strategy; or because he really believes this is the best option at this time. Oppenheimer suggested that the real answer is probably a combination of these factors, but cautioned against expecting action any time soon.

13. (C) Oppenheimer was upbeat about the effect that the announcement has had upon the Israeli public. During last year's election the Likud "successfully painted Mitzna (former Labor party leader) as naive for proposing this plan," Oppenheimer said. "Now, this same plan is being introduced by Sharon." Oppenheimer highlighted the widely reported poll in the nation's largest independent newspaper, Yediot Aronoth, which claimed that three-quarters of the Israeli population support a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip settlements. According to Oppenheimer, it will be very difficult for the national consensus to walk away from the concept of withdrawing from the Gaza Strip settlements now that their "architect is on board." Sharon, he said, has made the idea of unilateral settlement withdrawal a centrist philosophy again.

14. (C) Oppenheimer said he has been stunned by the low key response to the initiative from settlement leaders. He perceived the settler's march to the PM's office last week, their current vigil outside the Knesset, and statements by their leadership as perfunctory, lacking the fire and numbers that were typical of protests at the start of the Oslo Accords. Oppenheimer speculated that the reason for this low key response could be three-fold; the Gaza Strip settlements are small, holding little spiritual or historic value to most Israelis; the majority of settlers in the West Bank have resigned themselves to the possibility of Gaza settlements being evacuated; and/or the settlers are skeptical about whether Sharon is committed.

15. (C) When asked about whether the settlement withdrawal plan could initiate the fall of the current government coalition, Oppenheimer said that he believed it unlikely that either the National Religious Party (NRP) or National Union would leave the government before an irrevocable step was taken. Only the dismantlement of a settlement or serious action against large occupied outposts would cause these parties to abandon their current posts. Oppenheimer predicted that the leadership of these parties will denounce a PM visit to the U.S. to gain support for the plan, but will stop short of leaving the government. Oppenheimer stressed that ministers Eitam, Elon, Lieberman, Katz, and other settlement supporters in the government are being given a virtual free hand to continue settlement activity, at the

mere cost of the PM's verbal statements to the U.S. These ministers know that if they quit the government, their replacements (probably the Labor party) will freeze most settlement activity, Oppenheimer said. He concluded that "they will wait until the last possible moment before leaving the government."

16. (C) Comment: We agree with Oppenheimer's analysis, despite Lieberman's threats to the contrary, that the NRP and National Union will remain in the government as long as they can still credibly claim to their constituents that they are using their positions to foil the PM's disengagement impulses. The GOI continues to provide funding and assistance for settlement activity and drag its feet on the removal of all outposts established after March 2001. NRP and National Union can argue reasonably to their constituents that this would not be possible if they left the government. End comment.

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